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# Why the Greater Good is Good: Lessons from Harry Potter

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Maureen Zach  
 LSFY 103: The Soul of Harry Potter  
 Pastor Priggie  
 17 May 2011

### Why the Greater Good is Good: Lessons from Harry Potter

Is the greater good actually good? For centuries, individuals and society have used the greater good as a worthy goal and a justification for action. The question of whether the greater good is viewed as a productive or prideful aim has serious implications for moral philosophy and society. It is a productive aim when defined by selflessness, and a prideful aim when defined by selfishness. The greater good is a productive aim because of its foundation in selflessness, lack of motivation for power and control, presence in good society, absence in unequal society, Christian parallels and altruistic motivation. In the Wizarding World of Harry Potter, the greater good has these same associations. In the Harry Potter series, especially in *Deathly Hallows*, the productive aim is supported by elements of Harry's selflessness, the Dumbledore and Grindelwald scheme, prejudice in the Wizarding community, Christian themes and the triumph of selflessness. The greater good is grounded in concern for others over concern for self, and, therefore, cannot be defined as a prideful aim, because it is inherently unselfish in definition and nature.

The greater good, frequently referred to as the common good, is a moral value of society that evokes the honorable goal of endeavoring for the betterment of everyone in society. It is associated with language "of shared ideals, of loyalty and fair-dealing, of goods authentically worth the effort that is called for to secure them...it answers questions about excellence and right and justice" (Murphy 3). The greater good strives for what most supports, promotes and improves society as a whole. What best serves the community is elevated over what best serves the individual, with a mutual respect between people to commit to and work for what is most

favorable for society. William Connolly claims that “to appeal to the common good is to appeal to a set of shared purposes and standards which are fundamental to the way of life prized together by participants” (Jordan 73). The common good has been the underlying force behind societal laws and values to ensure the morality and success of civilizations throughout history. In its truest sense, the greater good compels people to set aside their personal interests and collaborate with others to identify with and work towards the optimal model of society for all. In other words, “the common good enjoins individuals to rise above their own self-interest, join together with others to form public policy and work in concert to bring the community vision to fruition” (Famakinwa 32).

Therefore, the greater good involves and demands selflessness. The interests and gains of others are more valuable than those of individuals when working for the benefit of everyone in society. Unselfish people “feel and act as if the long-term welfare of others is important independent of its effects on their own welfare” (Jencks 53). In the Harry Potter series, and especially in *Deathly Hallows*, many characters demonstrate selflessness, in particular Harry. Altruism is an essential part of Harry’s character, and unselfish actions are “‘what he does’ when the going gets tough and the hard decisions are made- in *every single book*” (Granger 77). Those around him call this selflessness his ‘saving-people thing.’ Harry never affirms this title, not wanting to draw attention to himself. In his eyes, helping others is the right, and only, thing to do. His aim for the greater good has nothing to do with power or personal gain. When he fights Voldemort for the Philosopher’s Stone in the first book, he obtains the Stone only because he does not want to use it himself. In the *Chamber of Secrets*, he faces mortal danger in order to save Ginny and the rest of the school from the Basilisk. Harry prevents Lupin and Sirius from killing Peter Pettigrew, his parents’ betrayer, in the *Prisoner of Azkaban*. In the *Goblet of Fire*,

he tries to save all of the hostages in the lake and offers to share the Triwizard Cup with Cedric. Voldemort takes advantage of Harry's 'saving-people thing' to lure him to the Department of Mysteries in the Ministry in the *Order of the Phoenix*. In the *Half-Blood Prince*, Harry sets off with Dumbledore to find the locket Horcrux only after he leaves the Felix Felicis with his friends who remain at battle at Hogwarts.

*Deathly Hallows* contains numerous examples of Harry's unselfishness as well. The book begins with his decision not to return to Hogwarts and hunt for the Horcruxes in the hope of saving the Wizarding community from Voldemort's rule. Despite the fact that Harry puts himself in grave danger, he asserts that "sometimes you've *got* to think about more than your own safety! Sometimes you've got to think about the greater good!" (Rowling 568). Throughout the story, Harry continually resists others' willingness to risk their lives for him, as seen in his opposition to the plot of the seven Potters and in his discomfort in endangering everyone by staying at the Weasley's. Harry's selflessness allows him to be "the worthy possessor of the Hallows" and relinquish them, even as their true owner, because he does not desire their power (720). In King's Cross, Dumbledore asks for Harry's pardon because "I have known, for some time now, that you are the better man" (713). His ultimate self-sacrifice in the forest to save everyone from Voldemort shows his complete transformation into a person of love and altruism.

Another character that exemplifies selflessness in the series is Dobby the house-elf. In his first warning to Harry not to return to Hogwarts in the *Chamber of Secrets* and in his self-sacrifice in *Deathly Hallows*, Dobby risks his life for the safety of Harry and the Wizarding community: "Their great hero, Harry Potter, was saved by the sacrifice of a free house-elf. Harry set Dobby free; Dobby dies to save Harry's life...Dobby dies because he knew that things

would be worse for his kind if Voldemort were in power, and that future freedom was possible with Voldemort out of the way” (Prinzi 256).

In theory, the common good is supposed to benefit everyone in society equally. But “in some cases, it seems that a common good is common only to a powerful part of the whole. In particular, the interests of the populace are sometimes named the common good even when they are quite hostile to all the rest of the republic” (Hanasz 70). Sometimes it is assumed that the objective is justified as long as the majority of people benefit from it. In some cases this concept is taken to the extreme, and the minority is seen as a threat to the common good of everyone else in society and is suppressed. This situation contradicts the principles of altruism and collective benefit that characterize the greater good, and, therefore, the notion of the greater good is eliminated. In terms of individual rights, “each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override. For this reason justice denies that the loss of freedom for some is made right by a greater good shared by others” (Famakina 27). The aim for the greater good is tainted and invalid if used to promote or restrain a certain group in society. The greater good becomes less about the welfare of others, and more about the assertion of control.

This assertion of power and control in the name of the greater good is illustrated in the friendship and schemes of young Dumbledore and Grindelwald in *Deathly Hallows*. Harry is appalled when he reads a letter from Albus to Gellert that calls for wizard domination in the name of the greater good. Not only does Dumbledore stress “Wizard domination being FOR THE MUGGLES’ OWN GOOD,” but also that they “seize control FOR THE GREATER GOOD. And from this it follows that where we meet resistance, we must use the force that is necessary and no more” (Rowling 357). Dumbledore and Grindelwald thought they knew what

was best for the magical and non-magical community and were willing to use violent means to achieve their vision. They believed that the greater good justified the mission, and overlooked their oppression of Muggles as long as the greater good was the goal. Dumbledore confesses to Harry in King's Cross that "I had a few scruples. I assuaged my conscience with empty words. I would all be for the greater good, and any harm done would be repaid a hundredfold in benefits for wizards" (716). Dumbledore recognized that his plan was about power and control, not legitimate greater good, when the reality of force and neglect in his schemes resulted in his younger sister's death. Ultimately, "Dumbledore came to realize that tyranny was really not 'good' for anyone. That desire was about power and control" (Rossi). The greater good cannot be justified in prideful assertions of power and control.

The greater good is inherently productive because, when applied correctly, and with a foundation in unselfish actions, it leads to a good society. In general, "the quality of life in any group depends on the way people treat each other, and that all have an interest in treating each other with respect, and attending to each other's needs" (Jordan 84). It logically follows that where moral ideas of respect, concern for others and common interest are present, the society is productive. On the other hand, "there can be no valid claim to being a good society from one in which the state distributes assets entirely according to non-moral criteria, or one which seeks no moral ends" (80). Since the greater good is defined in moral terms, the greater good is not only present in, but also the reason behind, successful societies. A society based on individual and selfish motives is not a prosperous environment for the whole community. As Machiavelli stated, "It is not the particular good but the common good (*non il bene particolare ma il bene commune*) that makes cities great" (Hanasz 68). The greater good is a productive aim because it stimulates unselfish and sacrificial attitudes that lead to fruitful society.

Consequently, where concern for the greater good is not present, society is flawed. This is demonstrated in the Harry Potter series by the inequality between magical brethren, Muggles and wizards, and blood status divisions. The two fountains in the Ministry of Magic demonstrate the prejudice in the Wizarding World. The first fountain, the Fountain of Magical Brethren, features a witch and wizard in the middle, surrounded by a house-elf, a centaur and a goblin. The magical creatures, and even the witch, are in subservient positions to the wizard, indicating the organization of power within the Wizarding World. Witches and wizards suppress the creatures, and either demote them to servitude (house-elves and goblins) or cast them from society altogether (centaurs and giants). They do not appreciate their unique magical power and give them no voice in their fate. Dumbledore recognizes the cruelty and danger in this practice, warning that “‘we wizards have mistreated and abused our fellows for too long, and we are now reaping our reward...’ (834). Dumbledore’s destruction of the fountain which told the lie was asymbolic action, pointing to the truth that it was *that* lie that gave rise to Voldemort, that gave rise to enemies of the Wizarding World” (Prinzi 221). The demotion of magical creatures is wrong because of its unjust assertion of power. The division and vulnerability it created within the Wizarding community allowed Voldemort’s regime to take control.

These implications are also seen in obsession over blood status, which is magnified by the Ministry’s purification regime in *Deathly Hallows*. Salazar Slytherin promoted the idea of Muggle-borns being inferior to pure-blood wizards. He desired to admit only those of pure blood to Hogwarts, but Gryffindor and the other houses denied his request. Voldemort and his followers resumed the fight and promoted the idea through the puppet Ministry. Fliers reading “MUDBLOODS and the Dangers They Pose to a Peaceful Pure-Blood Society” spread throughout the Wizarding World, and Muggle-borns were required to attend a trial to defend and

justify their magical background and legitimacy (Rowling 249). Wizards' initial prejudice made it easy for Voldemort and the Death Eaters to accentuate and amplify this inequality.

The second fountain in the Ministry atrium displays another inequality and prejudice in the Wizarding World. The new fountain erected by Voldemort's ministry depicts a witch and wizard sitting on grand thrones, with a description reading "Magic is Might." When Harry looks more closely at the thrones, he realizes "that what he had thought were decoratively carved thrones were actually mounds of carved humans: hundreds and hundreds of naked bodies, men women, and children, all with rather stupid, ugly faces, twisted and pressed together to support the weight of the handsomely robed wizards. 'Muggles,' whispered Hermione. 'In their rightful place'" (242). The greater good is absent from this picture. Voldemort and Grindelwald believe that the oppression of Muggles is for the greater good of the Wizarding community. However, this claim is about an assertion of power and not a selfless sacrifice for the good of others. Whether Wizards will be better off or not if Muggles are suppressed is irrelevant, because Wizard domination is an immoral and unjustifiable objective in terms of the greater good.

The morality and concern for others that is essential to the greater good evokes another tradition in society. Christianity is rooted in love- of and for God, Jesus and, most importantly, others. God loved humanity so much that he sent his only son into the world and gave him up on the cross in order to forgive humanity's sins. In his self-sacrifice, Jesus exhibited the greatest love of all- to give up one's life for another. Jesus displayed his love throughout his life, especially to the poor and his enemies. He told his disciples "'you shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:31). This 'golden rule' drives all Christian action, and insists that Christians rise above their self-interest and invest in concern for others. Jencks explains that in "Christianity...the faithful do unto others as they



would have others do unto them” (Jencks 56). The aim of the greater good is parallel to the aim of Christianity.

Therefore, the greater good in Harry Potter can be further revealed and examined in terms of Christianity. Harry Potter has been called the Christian church’s biggest missed opportunity for its “potential and power for Christian action for social change... While the series of books gives hints here and there toward those questions, it answers instead the very simple question: How, then, shall we live? How do people convinced of the power self-sacrificial love live in the world and work for its betterment? That, I think, is the ‘missed opportunity’” (Prinzi 212-13). The Christian call to love one another underlies Harry’s journey and the entire spirit of the series. Harry selflessly puts others before himself for the greater good, a greater good defined in terms of Christian morals: “That Harry’s ending looks an awful lot like a Christian transformation is no accident; the Christian God is love (1 John 4:8) and Christians are supposed to be known for the love they have for one another (John 13:35), especially sacrificial love, the love than which there is no greater (John 15:13)” (Granger 38). Harry’s self-sacrificial death in the forest in the image of Christ is the epitome of the greater good. His action is not defined in terms of power, control or self, but in love for others.

However, critics challenge that motivation for the greater good is not entirely disconnected from motivation for the individual good. These motivations may exist simultaneously, because “when people act together for the sake of mutual benefits in which they all share, then they are acting both in others’ interest (because others gain from their actions) and in their own (because they gain also)” (Jordan 16). When someone acts for the greater good, he or she consequently benefits because of his or her membership in society. This creates the dilemma of whether the concept of the greater good is undermined because of the presence of

self-interest. These critics question whether selfish interests motivate all selfless behavior:

“Rational individuals will always choose what gives them the best result (whether their aims are egoistic or altruistic)” (Jordan 1). Because the individual benefits from the greater good, his or her actions consciously or subconsciously affect his or her actions for the greater good.

Nevertheless, what is important is the motivation behind the action and justification. The greater good can only truly be carried out in selfless motivation wholly concerned about the interest of others. This does not dismiss the fact that individual concern may influence and be a part of all motivation. However, the claim that the greater good can exist only in terms of selfless motivation is warranted because a “person’s motives are always mixed...[and] sometimes one motive predominates and sometimes others. We can therefore speak meaningfully of largely principle-driven, largely interest-driven, and largely affectionate-driven behavior” (Holmes 273). It is possible and common for altruistic motivation to take precedence. After all, “moral ideas derive from our capacity for... ‘sympathy,’ or what we would now call ‘empathy.’ Because we are capable of experiencing the pleasure and pain of others, we cannot be completely selfish. Furthermore- and this is vitally important-...we value sympathy with others as an end in itself” (Jencks 58). Humans are empathetic beings capable of selfless motivation, and when this occurs, the greater good is present.

Unselfish motivation is the driving force behind the aim for the greater good in the Harry Potter series. In terms of Harry’s actions and motivations, “for seven books and thousands of pages, Potter never used violence except in self-defense, and he always tried to save lives, even those of his enemies. His tale is one of a constant and heartrending struggle to prevent sacrifice even by his dearest friends, rather than a cold-blooded calculation of who and how best to sacrifice for the greater good” (Maymin). Keeping others alive with the hope of a better future is

always Harry's motivation. The final test of his selflessness is in the knowledge that he has to sacrifice himself in order to defeat Voldemort. Harry accepts his fate in death willingly and without defending himself. He sees no other option, for "Dumbledore knew, as Voldemort knew, that Harry would not let anyone else die for him now that he had discovered it was in his power to stop it. The images of Fred, Lupin, and Tonks lying dead in the Great Hall forced their way back into his mind's eye, and for a moment he could hardly breathe: Death was impatient..." (Rowling 693). After showing the greatest love by laying down his life for others, Harry performs one final selfless act by returning to the Wizarding World in the hope that he could end the horror of Voldemort's regime. Dumbledore explains to him in Kings Cross that "by returning, you may ensure that fewer souls are maimed, fewer families are torn apart. If that seems to you a worthy goal, then we say good-bye for the present" (722). Harry thinks saving others is a worthy goal, and he pursues it his entire life. The heroes of the series are those who act out of interest for others for the greater good. Defeating Voldemort and the "rescuing of the Wizarding World is not going to be accomplished solely by wealthy superheroes or by the outcast. It will be accomplished by all groups working together without prejudice, by the advantaged abandoning their own privilege for the pursuit of a better work, by the disadvantaged working hand-in-hand in harmony with others" (Prinzi 219). *Deathly Hallows* shows that the only way to realize the greater good is in terms of selfless motivation.

The greater good is a productive aim in its establishment in unselfishness. In its genuine meaning, it cannot be a prideful aim because concern for others overrides concern for the self. Harry demonstrates this selflessness in his quest for the greater good throughout the Harry Potter series and, especially, in *Deathly Hallows*. When one group of society benefits over another, the greater good is not realized because of inherent motivations of power and control. Dumbledore

learned this in his plan for Wizard domination with Grindelwald. When greater good does not arise from selflessness and justice does not exist, society is flawed, as seen in the inequality in the Wizarding World and Voldemort's regime. Concern for others in the greater good parallels the Christian way of life as well, which is demonstrated in Christian themes of social justice and Harry's self-sacrifice in *Deathly Hallows*. Finally, the greater good is justified in selfless motivation, as seen in the greater good's triumph only in selflessness in the Harry Potter series. The greater good is a productive aim, and where it is defined as a prideful aim, it is not truly the greater good. Harry understood this, and worked for *this* greater good above all other things: "People's final memory of Harry Potter should be about a boy who chose to do all he could for the greater good" (Wagner). If everyone in society had Harry's 'saving people thing,' amazing things could happen for the greater good.

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